Some thoughts on *One Battle After Another*

Rick Ayers

One Battle After Another, dir. Paul Thomas Anderson (Sherman Oaks: Ghoulardi Film Company, 2025).

THERE HAVE BEEN DOZENS of excellent and insightful reviews of *One Battle After Another*, Paul Thomas Anderson's magnificent project in response to this political and cultural moment. As a Weather Underground veteran, I suppose if I could add anything useful it would be to provide perspective on the history of extra-legal, anti-capitalist resistance groups, which is what Thomas Pynchon was thinking about in *Vineland* (1990), the novel that animated some of the core of this film.[1]

Certainly, I caution my old comrades to avoid the error many political activists make when they engage with art, which is to demand that the piece be a literal representation of exactly what happened or even what might have happened. It is a movie, friends, and it's got to move. Artists take license with the facts, but when successful they capture a more precise truth than a simple historical narrative might. Their task is to represent a feeling, an atmosphere, a context (whether of menace or exultation) of the times.

By this test, *One Battle After Another* succeeds remarkably. Through the brilliant creation of characters, the evocative sets, the heart-pounding speed of the action, editing, and music, the film expands our access to a place and time, and confronts us with moral imperatives that must be either acted upon or retreated from. Some people suggest that this is a film aimed at Donald Trump but really it is a morality play concerning the conflict between capitalist power and resistance / revolution. Whereas Pynchon depicts the radicalism of the 60s and 70s from the standpoint of its afterlife under Reagan, Anderson's film moves between the 2000s and the present — but it pretty much tells an American story for any time. As Harry Belafonte has argued, the responsibility of artists is enormous: to engage in crucial cultural struggles in an arena that is not easily repressed (though they will try).[2]

Of course, the actions of the film's urban guerrilla group the French 75 are much more dramatic (and fun!) than anything we were able to pull off. But the feelings for commitment, comradery, and fugitive life are on point. There is something about adhering to the legally allowed, protesting under constant infiltration and assault from the government, that can be demoralizing and debilitating for a movement. Inevitably, in the late 60s, as resistance activists were being regularly jailed and leaders (mostly of color) were outright killed by the government, a sector of the movement decided to break away, to resist indictments, and to tear the veil of respectability — to go underground. The Weather Underground Organization (WUO) was one of the most visible of these groups, but there were many. During a year like 1970, when the WUO carried out a dozen bombings, hundreds of others occurred, against draft boards, Reserve Officers' Training Corps buildings, corporate centers, and elsewhere.

Some decisions the filmmakers made were perfect — and *One Battle After Another* would have suffered without them. One was the inclusion of the huge demonstration against the military / ICE raids. This was important to move the focus beyond the narrow "cops and robbers" binary. All these fights exist within the context of the mass movement. And the WUO never saw itself as simply an isolated military formation. We carried out property destruction but we never kidded ourselves that we were going toe to toe militarily with the U.S. empire. We were engaged in what Ho Chi Minh described as "armed propaganda"[3] — not an isolated foco in the mountains (as Régis Debray wrongly characterized Fidel's guerrillas[4]) but a force able to hit the enemy in a way that encouraged the resistance of the broader movement.

The film also captures the challenges that such radical commitment creates. Particularly affecting is the relationship between Bob (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his daughter Willa (Chase Infiniti). However extreme the radical actions of his past, however fuzzy his stoned presence, Bob is a devoted and caring father whom we recognize — just as we see what a powerful and deep young woman Willa has grown up to be.

It pushed me to think back on some of the big dilemmas we faced and still face. For example: in our youth, we throw down hard, push all the chips to the middle of the table, and imagine we might well die but decide that the struggle for justice is worth it, might even demand it. We also experience love, deep love that makes another demand: commitment to life and to the next generation. So we have kids. As time goes on, the questions become: did we do right by these kids? Was it fair to thrust them into danger and risk? Will they understand that we had to fight, especially for them and for future generations? There is no easy answer. Should one pull back and lead a respectable middle-class life that doesn't rock the boat? What good would that do, for anyone? This was an issue young people wrestled with during the revolutionary 70s. It was a very real challenge I faced in discussions with my *compañera* when we were underground in the 70s, in relation to our daughters. We would debate, we would agree, we would disagree. But the ethical imperative to act, in light of the need for care, is complicated. As James Forman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) said in 1968, "And you ain't got no business having any children if you ain't gonna fight for their freedom."[5] During *One Battle After Another*, I was having all the feels on that question.

These are also the questions faced by my brother Bill, Bernardine Dohrn, David Gilbert, and Kathy Boudin. Zayd Dohrn explored these challenges in the podcast *Mother Country Radicals*.[6] People have always had children, always brought in the next generation, even those who were fleeing the U.S. cavalry invaders and those besieged in Stalingrad. Nevertheless, I never rationalized the question so easily that I was fully comfortable with our choices. It was a deep contradiction and all one can do is dive into it, live it, knowing there is no resolution beyond the actual working out of lives.

The film manages to show how revolutionary action is sexy and also how it is ugly. The activists are not cardboard, one-dimensional characters. Each approaches the revolutionary work differently: the pirate radio guy "Billy Goat" (Paul Grimstad), the Jewish radical "Mae West" (Alana Haim), the black leader Laredo (Wood Harris) — they all have distinct personalities. And the "freedom high" of Perfidia Beverly Hills (Teyana Taylor) versus the solid workmanship approach of Deandra (Regina Hall) is deeply relatable; these are personalities that can be found in any guerrilla column. But still, each of these fighters, even though they are imperfect, enters the fight with a pure heart. They want people to be free.

The deep characterization of Willa was another important choice. In many such stories, she might have been set up as a victim, as passive and in need of protection, or simply quiet. But Willa has agency, she really fights for herself, saves herself. And, after all is said and done, she is taking off from the home with Bob to join an anti-ICE action in Oakland. That's just the next battle after the other ones.

I should add here that I find myself a bit mystified at the way the WUO and the Black Liberation Army (BLA) have grown in significance over the decades. At the time, the WUO was a pretty small phenomenon, a brash and defiant group of young people determined to live beyond the range of the eyes of the state and to strike some direct blows against the empire. As the organization faded away (in 77, 80, or 81, depending on how you count it), the urban guerrilla resistance seemed to be over. But a number of cultural moments — Sam Green and Bill Siegel's documentary *The Weather Underground* (2002),[7] Obama's run for president in 2008, during which he was charged with "palling around with terrorists,"[8] *Mother Country Radicals* — have seemed to reanimate the meaning of the WUO and keep it in the cultural and political debates.

Why is this? Partly, it is a new generation's romanticization of the underground life. After all, our life was not all running from the FBI and planting bombs. There were meals to cook, jobs to go to, and broken-down cars to repair. Perhaps the WUO stays alive in the imagination of the public, or at least the Left, because people are longing for a rejection of imperialism that is more thorough and powerful than centrist Democrats can offer. There was plenty that we accomplished, significant acts of sabotage (such as the U.S. Air Force's computer nerve center in the Pentagon) as well as many smaller ones, often in response to atrocities (including annual attacks on companies complicit in the overthrow of Salvador Allende, on the anniversary of the 1973 coup in Chile). But looking back to assess our contribution, I think the most significant thing we did was not so much the actions as it was not getting caught. It was being a fugitive organization, living with false identities and clandestine communication networks, in touch with "above ground" activists and supporters, for years. We maintained an underground network that also took in (sometimes "babysat") other people on the run — Catholic resisters, army deserters, wanted fugitives — which definitely freaked out the repressive forces and encouraged the resistance.

Some of the idiots on the Right have grumbled that *One Battle After Another* is a deeply anti-fascist film. And indeed it is. I guess the complainers are not just idiots; they are fascists. The film exposes not only state-military repression but also shady, secret, non-governmental, fascist enforcers sponsored by the billionaires. They are very real today and are extremely focused on white racial "purity." At the same time, they are puerile and ridiculous ("Hail, St. Nick!").

It was cool to imagine that the filmmakers looked at different aspects of the WUO and the BLA in their world-building. Certainly quotes and moments have been inspired by these historical markers. Many other details — the "dead baby" ID method, the removal of a heating-duct cover in a bathroom to place a bomb, the phone-booth phone call — are lifted from (or should I say "paying homage to") the real history. And Bob watching *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) (mouthing the words even) is so on point and hilarious.

So many characters are brilliantly drawn and important. Of course, the two white guys, Leonardo DiCaprio and Sean Penn, are in the spotlight, which is unfortunate. Even though they turn in incredible performances, I'm thinking, really? The white guys are still in the center? More importantly, Regina Hall, Chase Infiniti, Teyana Taylor, and Benicio del Toro (Sensei Sergio St. Carlos) should be getting all the accolades. They are so good.

Especially impressive is the nod to the deep organization of the Mexican / Central American networks, in this case under the leadership of Sensei

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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines
Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the "Old" (1920s–30s), "New" (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

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On Mamdani

Jonathan Rosenblum

LET US PRAISE the remarkable movement that carried Zohran Mamdani into the mayor's office in America's largest city: 100,000 volunteers,[1] led by socialists and driven by bold, transformative demands — a grassroots force that toppled a deeply entrenched political establishment and sent reverberations not just throughout the U.S. but around the world. Mamdani was an exceptional candidate who articulated the hopes and dreams of millions of working-class people.

Taking place in the center of global capital, the electoral win was quite an accomplishment. For the broader movement, it couldn't have been more timely. It injected hope into the ranks of millions fighting an overwhelming — and at times dispiriting — war against Trump, the billionaires, and their fascist minions.

But for the working class, winning political office is not the same as winning political power. Recognizing the crucial difference between the two is critical if we are going to figure out how to fight. Too many on the Left are understandably giddy after this significant electoral win and gloss over this. As the Mamdani administration gets underway, this distinction is becoming clearer.

The CEOs of BlackRock, Vanguard, KKR, JPMorgan, Goldman Sachs, and other corporations that call New York home have not declared, "Okay, socialists, you won. Here are the keys to the city." They are fighting even harder now — both publicly and behind the scenes — against Mamdani's calls for a rent freeze, free bus service, and universal child care.

Can we win these things — and more — in the coming year? Yes — but everything is a power struggle. The outcome will be determined not by Mamdani occupying the mayor's office, and certainly not by his aggressive courting of our political enemies, but by the balance of forces between the social movement and those enemies.

The rules of engagement in this power struggle are anything but fair. Capitalist governments are structured to block — not welcome — transformative policies. It is not an open, freewheeling arena in which the ideas that win the most votes prevail. Rather, the civil state is a construct specifically designed to uphold, reinforce, and reproduce the capitalist status quo. By "state," I mean the full range of institutions that establish, maintain, and enforce the rules governing civil society; the executive and legislative branch of government, the bureaucracy, the courts, and the police, along with adjacent institutions, including the two main U.S. political parties and the media. More than a century ago, Lenin observed that, "the state is an organ of class domination, an organ of oppression of one class by another; its aim is the creation of 'order' which legalises and perpetuates this oppression by moderating the collisions between the classes."[2]

Having lost direct control of the mayor's seat, big business and their political servants are now working overtime to constrain Mamdani through more reliable local and state officials — such as Governor Hochul, state legislators, and the rest of the Democratic Party establishment. They will attempt to co-opt and water down his policies while protecting their billionaire benefactors. Big business will announce capital strikes to frighten the populace. They will sow misinformation through their media outlets to turn public sentiment against him. Some will even welcome — or at least not resist — a Trump decision to send ICE and the National Guard in, creating a state of terror on New York's streets. The election does not end class war — it escalates it. Is the movement ready?

The socialists' binary choice

November's electoral wins — in New York, Seattle,3 and elsewhere — gave us strategic beachheads inside the halls of capitalist power. Properly used, they can build movements, train a new generation of working-class fighters, and serve as launch points for bold, transformative demands — but this is hardly a given. If not organized around the task of revolutionary struggle, these erstwhile socialist beachheads will squander and demobilize the movement's energy.

The first strategic choice for newly-elected socialists and their movements is deciding whether to continue as radical agitators — fighting for bold working-class demands and building popular movements so we can upend the racist, violent, corrupt, planet-destroying capitalist system — or, having attained a political office, surrounded by the sinecures of elevated status and enchanted by the trappings of influence, whether they will come to believe that the bourgeois state is a malleable entity they can enter and reform from within? Simply put, the choice is class struggle, or class snuggle.

It's an old choice — one that has bedeviled socialists ever since they entered the political arena. Unfortunately, the vast majority have chosen class snuggle, with disastrous results. The thousands of reform-minded socialists who won legislative offices in Europe in the early 20th century did not disrupt capitalism from within. Instead, they became co-conspirators with imperialism, choosing nationalism over class solidarity and joining war cabinets in 1914 to cheer on the bloody Great War.

In our time, socialists Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and Bernie Sanders won political office promising to shake things up. After her 2018 election, AOC joined 200 Sunrise Movement protesters occupying Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi's office, demanding that the incoming House Speaker commit to passing Green New Deal legislation.[4] Her participation in civil disobedience signaled that she intended to bring the street movement into the halls of power. Alas, that hopeful moment soon faded.

Just a year later, AOC had pivoted away from the politics of disruption. She criticized other progressives as being too "conflict-based."[5] She affectionately referred to Pelosi as "Mama Bear," even as her signature Green New Deal bill languished in the Speaker's legislative dungeon. AOC and the three other members of the Squad held the balance of power in the House but refused to force votes on Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, or a raise of the pathetic $7.25 federal minimum wage.[6] In the fall of 2022, with railroad workers threatening to strike over the right to paid sick leave, AOC and other self-described progressives joined the Biden administration to outlaw the railroad strike and impose contracts that had been democratically rejected by the union members.[7]

As a presidential candidate in 2016 and 2020, Sanders fulminated against the billionaires and rallied millions to the cause of Medicare for All. But when he was pushed out of those races by the Democratic Party establishment, he quickly fell in line, endorsing Hillary Clinton, then Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. He, and both AOC and Biden, shamefully became Left-flank foils for the Democrats' 2024 electoral disaster. These are the bitter fruits of socialist reformism.

We now come to Mamdani. After this year's primary, Mamdani made a hard pivot toward reformism. By appointing political establishment figures to his inner circle, attempting to make peace with the police, and publicly softening his line on policies — like taxing the rich — Mamdani has committed to work within the existing power structures. He has cast his campaign as one for "the soul of the Democratic Party."[8] Any remaining blinders on the Left were ripped off in late November when Mamdani traveled to the White House for a photo op with Trump. Corporate media were agog at Mamdani's mediagenic commitment to find common ground with Trump on affordability issues. The rest of us were nauseated, wondering why the incoming mayor didn't use his time and political capital to build the grassroots movement in New York — to fight for the campaign's demands and to prepare the streets for ICE and the National Guard.

In his first period in office next year, Mamdani may well make some progress as a reformer; the capitalist class is adept at granting temporary concessions to relieve political pressure. But we should also recognize that this reformist path will reach a dead-end as it crashes up against the realities of capitalism. Mamdani's strategic choices may signal the death of any prospect that he will lead a genuinely socialist movement from within City Hall.

That is not the end of the matter. There is also an outside movement — thousands of seasoned activists, many of them socialists — organized, confident, and ready to fight for core demands. This movement, too, has a choice to make, and it need not — and should not — default to Mamdani's strategy. It can take the road less chosen, one that continues and escalates the class struggle and advances the municipal socialist project.

What do revolutionary politics look like?

This is certainly the road less traveled. For an idea of what that could look like, activists should turn to Seattle, Washington. From 2013–23, a sole socialist on the nine-member City Council led movements that tallied breakthrough achievements and changed the region's political landscape.

My new book chronicles how movements led by Kshama Sawant won transformative victories over the course of a decade.[9] I worked in her council office for most of that time, during which we passed the first-ever tax on Amazon to build social housing — beating Amazon's capital strike threat.[10] Seattle became the first big city to win a $15/hour minimum wage, which in January 2026 rose to $21.30/hour.[11] We strengthened renters' rights, increased abortion and mental healthcare funding, banned caste discrimination, funded LGBTQ youth services, and more. Sawant won re-election three times, defeating the combined forces of the political establishment and Amazon, Starbucks, Microsoft, Expedia, global financiers, and developers. After a decade in office, Sawant left undefeated. She is now running for Congress[12] against Adam Smith, a warmongering 14-term incumbent Democrat and ardent defender of the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

We did not win by trying to change mainstream political parties from within or by playing by the establishment's rules. We formed our own independent political movements, building power outside of — and in opposition to — the political establishment. Ours was a decidedly class-struggle approach, informed by Marxist analysis. It stood in sharp counterpoint to the reformism of AOC, Sanders, and their spinoffs.

Our movement was led by Sawant and the political organization she belonged to, Socialist Alternative. As in New York City and other major metropolitan areas, Seattle has been monopolized for decades by Democratic Party politicians. Many claim progressive bona fides, but their role always has been to keep a steady hand at the till of capitalism — enacting liberal social policies while ensuring things never get too far out of hand. This was the political establishment firmly in charge when Sawant entered office.

Sawant announced that her political role was to serve as a shop steward for the working class — accountable to people in the streets, not in the suites. Taking a cue from the Paris Commune, Sawant declared that she would only accept an average worker's paycheck.[13] The remainder of her $117,000/year City Council salary was directed to solidarity funds supporting worker and community struggles. Tracing Sawant's 10 years on the Seattle City Council, my book details the theory and practice of what I call three pillars of Marxist insurgent struggle.

These are, in brief: a fighting approach based on class struggle; bold, transformative demands to propel the movement; and ongoing grassroots democracy. My book looks at these three pillars in the context of Sawant's leadership in office, but the principles apply to socialist movement work generally, whether or not the movement holds political office. Today, they provide a timely framework for socialist-led movements in New York and elsewhere.

First, the campaign strategies developed by Sawant and the movement recognized the state's hostility to socialist ideas. State and local governments, the courts, and their bureaucratic adjutants, are hostile to working-class interests, organized to reinforce the existing power relationships by "protecting the economy." As such, these institutions restrict policy choices to those acceptable to capitalism. To overcome that, Sawant and the socialists knew they had to break rules and disrupt state power.

We did this in big and small ways: we used the ballot initiative as a cudgel to force City Council action on minimum wages and the Amazon tax; convened meetings of the City Council's Renters' Rights Committee — which Sawant chaired — on weekends so working renters could attend; openly challenged the Democratic Party establishment in press conferences; organized demonstrations inside and outside City Hall; flooded City Council meetings with placard-wielding community members; and organized direct actions on gentrifying developers and union-busting bosses.

Sawant boldly advertised her Socialist Alternative affiliation in campaign literature and speeches, and refused alliances and back-room dealings with the Democratic Party. Instead, she built forums of workers and community members to bolster and steer her work inside City Hall. She treated the council office as a beachhead for the movement, opening up the office to activists and speaking from the City Council rostrum — not to persuade the other councilmembers, but to organize community members, amplify movement demands, and expose the hypocrisy of the Democrats.

Contrast that with contemporary progressives and most reform-minded socialists who enter office. They slide into the habits and customs of political respectability, overvaluing persuasion and personal relationships. They become immersed in the legislative process and downplay movement-building work. They quietly accept the salary and perks of office, fail to analyze class interests, and reproduce the capitalist-state functions in their role. Some build campaigns that issue bold rhetorical demands but keep tactics within the boundaries established by state power, as AOC did in the months following her sit-in in Pelosi's office. Many may run as outside agitators, but once in office, they trade organizing for legislating. This is a recipe for failure.

Choosing class allegiance — whether to align with state institutions and state power or with the working class — happens very early on in the formation of any movement. Marx observed, "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie."[14] That remains true today, in New York and elsewhere. No matter how much they declare Left-wing bona fides, Left political leaders will default to joining the political establishment "committee" — destined to reinforce, not oppose, state power — unless they consciously distinguish themselves from the get-go.

Many contemporary reform-minded socialists have tried to straddle the line between outside agitator and inside player — but this quickly becomes an impossible position. Even while running on third-party lines, they seek dual endorsements with the Democratic Party, quietly accept the full financial benefits of political office, and focus on inside-the-legislature cajoling and relationship-building instead of movement-building outside. Crucially, they see themselves and their office as distinct from the movement — not as a political arm of the movement and not directly accountable to rank-and-file community members. They set re-election as their paramount goal, foregoing the purpose of a revolutionary holding office in the first place.

One doesn't need to be a full-throated defender of the ruling class, or accept direct funding from the Chamber of Commerce, to fit snugly into the folds of the capitalist political establishment. Simply shedding the politics and tactics of class struggle once in office renders a formerly radical leader part of the establishment, and it strips them of any effective leadership role in an independent, anti-capitalist movement. Reformists, as Rosa Luxemburg observed more than a century ago, "do not really choose a more tranquil, calmer and slower road to the same goal, but a *different* goal. Instead of taking a stand for the establishment of a new society they take a stand for surface modifications of the old society."[15]

Today, progressives serve as useful foils for the political establishment, advancing "surface modifications" and providing tangible evidence to the Democratic Party's Left-leaning supporters that the party accepts dissenting perspectives. Rather than undermining the system, reformism with no greater objective in mind actually *strengthens* capitalism — lending legitimacy to bourgeois hegemony and maintaining the core of the exploitative system while relieving pressure to overthrow it.

This brings us to the second pillar of Marxist insurgent politics: movement-building around immediate material struggles that connect to a broader call for socialism. This was the central argument in Leon Trotsky's *Transitional Program* (1938), which called for fights to build "the bridge between present demands and the socialist program of the revolution."[16] In the 2014 battle for a $15 minimum wage, Sawant called for democratic, public ownership of major corporations, pointing to their insatiable exploitation of workers. In the fight for the Amazon tax, she pushed to bring housing under public control, given the failure of the private housing market to supply quality homes. She called for a democratically elected renter-oversight board, arguing that neither bureaucracy nor private business could be trusted to properly manage social housing. Economic destitution, racism, and homelessness are features — not bugs — of capitalism. It would not be sufficient, Sawant underscored, to reduce human misery by winning the material issue at hand without pointing to the root cause of the problem. In advancing the movement's immediate demands, Sawant's tenure in City Hall exposed the systemic inability of big business and capitalism to meet people's needs. It was a political master class in contemporary *Transitional Program* strategy.

Today's reform-minded socialists and progressives, on the other hand, may advocate for working-class demands but fail to extend broader societal change. In doing so, they detach the immediate demand from the source of the problem. A common example: demanding more affordable housing but failing to lay blame on the corporate developers and landlords who control the private housing market. In this manner, reformers move from one campaign to another, taking aim at the maladies of capitalism without analyzing why these problems persist. You can't properly treat a cancer without first having a correct diagnosis. A policy demand without root-cause analysis will not solve the problem it targets. Instead, it trains activists to become reform advocates instead of promoters of revolutionary change. The results are campaigns that begin with lofty slogans and ideals — "Housing for All!" — but degenerate into appeals for liberal reforms that fail to inspire and mobilize working people, let alone build politically independent, democratically accountable movements.

The reformists' failure to demand broader change springs, in part, from a lack of confidence in working people. Today's reform-minded socialists and progressives — just like their reformist progenitors of more than a century ago — worry that they could lose votes or alienate parts of the movement if they raise bold demands. They argue that people "aren't ready" for socialist-oriented demands. Or they start off with a bold program but make compromises because they believe people are unprepared to fight for a radical program. They count votes and give up rather than develop a fighting program to win. They think that by making compromises they can tame the opposition, but in the absence of a powerful movement, reformists' tactical compromises only reveal a movement's weakness and embolden opponents to escalate demands for yet more concessions.

The Sawant experience demonstrates what happens when movement leaders trust workers to think big and act boldly. Working people alienated by mainstream politics become engaged because they see a movement that speaks to their material needs, explains the underlying systemic problem, and provides a course of action for newly energized community members.

We now turn to the third and final pillar of Marxist insurgent politics, movement democracy. On an individual level, democracy means having a voice in determining the economic, social, and ecological conditions in which you live. On a collective level, it means having agency — that is, power — to use that voice to effectively challenge oppressive systems, advocate for material changes, and construct a new social order. "Democracy" as it's talked about today in mainstream U.S. society is narrowly defined. It is typically cast in reductionist examples, like quadrennial elections or the roll calls that conclude legislative battles. Democracy, in this construct, is something that you're only marginally involved in. Elections offer limited choices. Racist voter-suppression laws ban millions from participating. Arcane rules govern legislative debates. Unelected courts roll back popular gains. Government bodies meet during times that preclude most people from taking part. It's no wonder that increasing numbers of Americans see "democracy" as not an expression of their own social agency but rather as something alienating, outside their control and manipulated by the political establishment to meet the desired ends of the elites. It is something that is done to them. That narrow, contorted manifestation is not true democracy.

Democracy can't be divorced from the question of collective power. For today's political establishment, democratic practices, like elections, are mechanisms for legitimizing their own hold on society — serving to tame radical currents and channel popular energy into activities that reinforce the state and the vice grip of the political duopoly. If you have electoral rights, yet no real ability to challenge the status quo and effect social change, then you don't have true democracy. This façade of democracy is dominant under capitalism. It serves to reinforce and reproduce the status quo: the hegemony of the ruling class over the rest of us.

In contrast, movement democracy involves ongoing collective engagement and action by community members to fight for the things they need without institutional gatekeeping. Movement democracy means scheduling meetings accessible to ordinary community members to actively solicit ideas from workers and tenants, create organizing spaces and resources for activists, formulate

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concrete demands, mobilize people around those demands, and ensure that campaign leaders are accountable to the community.

In early 2014, Seattle's $15-minimum-wage movement committed to a ballot initiative if the City Council failed to act. The initiative strategy was debated and adopted democratically in a weekend assembly of hundreds of workers. The decision issued from that mass meeting proved decisive in forcing the political establishment to concede on $15.

Later, as chair of the City Council's Renters Rights Committee, Sawant often scheduled evening meetings in working-class neighborhood community centers or in local churches so that more people could participate. By converting the council office into an organizing center, Sawant also ensured community activists had a place to meet and access resources like lists of allies, research materials, and printing and rally supplies. The movement's "Tax Amazon" action conferences were attended by hundreds of people each with one vote, no matter their day job, union affiliation, or expertise. The democratic process instilled participants with a strong sense of ownership over the campaign. It showed the political establishment that Sawant was speaking not just as an individual elected official but for a broad, committed constituency.

This practice of working-class movement democracy is essential to revolutionary political struggle because only by building a mass base of support can workers wield the power they need to advance demands, win, and then enforce those victories.

True movement democracy also requires leadership accountability to rank-and-file activists. When Sawant first took office, many figures in the political establishment thought it was odd that she spoke typically in the first-person plural. She introduced bills as "our legislation" or "our movement's demands" and referred frequently to "our council office." For Sawant and the socialists, the council position was not a personal office, even though her name appeared on the ballot and on the office door frame. The office was an integral part of the working-class movement. It was the insurgency's unwelcome presence inside enemy territory; she just happened to occupy it. Sawant was accountable to the movement, acting always as a representative of the organization that had led the insurgent election, Socialist Alternative, and more broadly, the working-class members who had elected her and who came together to make decisions on how to do battle.

When resistance seems futile, reformism becomes the easy way out

Activists might reasonably ask why Sawant's Marxist insurgent politics haven't been more widely adopted on the U.S. political Left. Challenging capitalism in the 21st century is certainly an intimidating task. Consider the systemic obstacles: the ruling class has a consolidated hold on power, much more so than in earlier days of capitalism's development. Especially after the U.S. Supreme Court's *Citizens United v. FEC* decision opened the corporate cash spigots, the electoral arena is an extraordinarily challenging field of contest for political insurgencies. Bourgeois forms of governance are more mature — their architects having learned over the last century to hone the instruments of limited democracy while tightening the grip that elites hold on the actual levers of power. They have become more skilled than their predecessors at co-opting sections of the working class and dividing and sabotaging emerging movements.

The aura of political invincibility also reinforces today's capitalist hegemony. The 1990–91 dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc removed a political counterweight and emboldened elites to insist that "there is no alternative" to capitalism, as the late British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once declared. Under today's ascendant neoliberal ideology — and its latest iteration, Trump's neofascism: the brazen fusing of big capital and government into a single hegemonic force — the ruling class has freed restraints on capital, slashed social spending, broken unions, and adeptly disciplined the working class through the manipulation of markets, public debt, trade policy, and interest rates. Racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia remain potent tools to divide workers. The mainstream media — increasingly corporate-controlled, and cowed by the new Trump era — is a reliable channel for reinforcing ruling class will and capitalist ideology.

Those obstacles explain why resistance to capitalism can seem futile — why so many political activists on the Left, like Mamdani, can give up on revolutionary politics, even as they acknowledge the mounting economic and climate crises. Indeed, reformism exerts a powerful gravitational pull precisely because of the severity of the global crises. By immersing themselves in campaigns that seek only incremental policy change, or by supporting DSA-endorsed Democrats, activists feel that they are at least doing *something*. This understandable impulse explains the meteoric rise of Left reformist politics in the last 10 years.

But this is precisely the same mistake that European socialist reform advocates made more than a century ago in the runup to World War I. Those forerunners insisted that they could successfully resist the imperial war drive while navigating within state parliaments. The reformers' decision to work within the political confines of a system marching relentlessly toward global conflict had tragic consequences. Today, we face similar circumstances. By downplaying the central role of class conflict, Mamdani, AOC, Sanders, and other reformers are repeating this historic mistake.

Moreover, attempting to convince fellow working-class members that our best shot lies within the Democratic Party breeds discouragement and cynicism as transformational ideas get crushed time and again by Party leaders — or worse: Democratic leaders meekly protest while Trump attacks marginalized communities and worker rights. The Democratic political establishment is crystal clear about which side of the class struggle they take. "We're capitalist. And that's just the way it is," Party leader Nancy Pelosi has declared.[17]

That is why inside-the-party initiatives by democratic socialists like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez — such as Medicare for All and the Green New Deal — have gone nowhere, and why the bold ideas of aspiring progressives, like Chicago Mayor Bandon Johnson, wither and die. You simply cannot build an anti-capitalist movement within a capitalist party.

A century and a half ago, Marx and Engels observed that the Paris Commune failed to survive because, "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes."[18] Likewise, today's reformist socialists are badly mistaken in thinking that somehow they can wrest control of the Democratic Party and wield it as a weapon for transformational change. They should take Pelosi's statement at face value.

The way forward

To avoid that trap in New York and elsewhere, social movements must organize independently, guided by the three pillars of Marxist insurgent struggle. That means working in solidarity with reformist officeholders only when there is agreement on the demand and method of struggle, but being prepared to work apart from — and even in opposition to — those officeholders.

The movement-building work of the last year gives us a foundation. Neighborhood committees — such as those developed during Mamdani's campaign and those fighting ICE in Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and elsewhere — can become the building blocks for citywide movements.[19] These city movements, in turn, combine to form the foundation of a national movement. One post-election suggestion from New York activists is a mass petition in support of public services.[20] Good idea, but this is only the start. We must think bigger: citywide marches that flood the streets with hundreds of thousands of workers taking the day off, occupations of state capitals — like Albany — until the politicians yield on local taxing authority, shutdowns of cities when Trump tries to send in his ICE thugs. Over time, escalating, disruptive strategies must create a political crisis for the elites and build fortifications against Trump's war on immigrants and other marginalized communities. Such a program is not going to be developed inside the offices of reform socialists who have pivoted to work inside the political establishment. It must be built from the outside.

These outside movements also need to recalibrate the demands made during electoral campaigns. "Rent freeze!" was an important slogan, but it is hardly radical. Previous City Hall administrations enacted rent freezes in 2015,[21] 2016,[22] and 2020,[23] and rent controls apply only to four of every ten rental units in the city.[24] New York City renters need more than a freeze in the exorbitant cost of living — they need a rollback.

A socialist-led movement could demand a tax of billionaires to build social housing, or even public expropriation of major private residential landlords, especially those who control non-rent-stabilized homes. These profiteers are disproportionately responsible for New York's soaring housing costs. If we believe that housing is a social right, then our demands must match that slogan.

During the mayoral campaign, the establishment press characterized Mamdani's call for public groceries as radical. That is not true. Millions of members of the military and their families are intimately familiar with the idea, since they shop daily at on-base public commissaries that offer goods at prices 16–21% lower than Walmart, Albertson's, and other private for-profit groceries.[25] Mamdani called for just one public grocery in each of the five boroughs — a drop in the bucket compared to the need for affordable food. A socialist-led movement must significantly up the demand.

Mamdani also has called for a $30 minimum wage in the city — but not until 2030. Los Angeles just approved a $30 minimum wage for tourism workers by 2028. Santa Fe, New Mexico just adopted a law tying minimum wages to local rental rates. Why not build a movement to demand $30 a lot sooner? To tie it to housing costs? At present, a $30 wage isn't even enough for a single full-time worker to pay for an average New York City apartment *today*.

November's elections gave Left social movements tremendous momentum. But Mamdani's election was not a coronation. It was an expression of the deep and wide sentiment for big change. Radical grassroots movements must resist the gravitational pull of insider strategies. They must fight against the attraction of reformism, which will squander this new energy. The movement that made history in the 2025 elections must strike out in an independent direction — informed by the 10-year Seattle experience — to give us a fighting chance against the billionaires and Trump, and to build a truly democratic socialist movement in the U.S. **|P**

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"Some thoughts," continued from page 1

Sergio. Of course, Bob is flailing in an ongoing panic attack while the brilliant Sensei stays calm and implements a stronger, more effective response to the attacks, with a deeper network, than the white guy ever could. This reminds us that under any circumstances, even today, with horrible ICE kidnappings and the military occupation of cities, people find a way to resist. They organize, improvise, and carry on. The chance to be reminded of that truth is the reason *One Battle After Another* is a worthy cultural expression for our times. **|P**

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[4] Régis Debray ,"Latin America: The Long March," *New Left Review* I, no. 33 (Sept/Oct 1965): 27. Debray described a *foco* as a small guerrilla cadre which "establishes itself at the most vulnerable zone of the national territory, and then slowly spreads like an oil patch, propagating itself in concentric ripples through the peasant masses to the smaller towns, and finally to the capital."

[5] James Forman, "Liberation Will Come from a Black Thing" (Students for a Democratic Society, ca. 1968), <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/forman-1.htm>.

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"'Under a covert class dictatorship,'" continued from page 3

Most of the overt class dictatorships of the world have never been fascism. Fascism was a particular moment from the early 20th century to the 1950s, and it was a reaction to the revolutionary movement. The Germans, Italians, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, and Romanians all had little in common except for opposing Bolshevism.

When World War II, or what I would now rather call the Second Great Slaughter, was over, and the U.S. did what Kautsky said was going to be possible, they had NATO in place, and capitalism didn't need overt dictatorships across Western Europe anymore.

There is all this noise on the Left about a couple of hundred Nazis marching around Victoria, but then never a word about the state, because we face a covert dictatorship run through the state and assisted increasingly by AI. The last thing they want to do in places like Australia is to impose an overt dictatorship; that's not in their interest right now. But if they're going to lose control of the system, they'll do anything. That's not the challenge for us at the moment. And because the Left is screaming, "the fascists are coming," they are ignoring the creeping covert dictatorship. It's certainly the case that you've got to oppose the far Right on the ground, because they go around terrorizing people. But that is totally marginal to state power and class power in society. Anti-fascism is just the Left big-noting itself. The kinds of anti-fascist struggles that actually went on in the 30s are completely foreign to the Left today. I say to the anti-fascist of today, "comrade, what's your weapon of choice?" None of them have ever heard a gun fired in anger, and they think they can overthrow the capitalist state.

JB: How do you see the role of someone like you as a public intellectual intervening in the historical consciousness of young people?

HM: The simple answer to the question is to assume nothing. The pamphlets I've done on introducing *Capital* are aimed at people who have never and will never read a word of Marx apart from what's in the pamphlet. It's not designed to engage in Marxology. It is trying to get at what we've been saying today: basic things like labor time, exploitation, surplus value. We need to convey a few things like that to people, but even that can be a hell of a lot because the capitalist system is complex. An analysis of it cannot just be boiled down to one slogan.

In terms of educating young people, I'll just end with an illustrative story from Alan Roberts, an old Leftist down in Victoria. He had been in Queensland when he was in the Communist Party in the early 50s. He went into the Party headquarters one day, and he could hear the Party secretary in the next room talking. He was in the office for about 40 minutes, and the secretary just went on and on. Alan asked one of the women in the office, "what's the Party secretary doing in there?" She answered, "listening to the youth." **|P**

[1] Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia: An Argument Concerning the Social Origins of Australian Radicalism and Nationalism* (Ringwood: Penguin Books Australia, 1970).

[2] Humphrey McQueen, *Gallipoli to Petrov: Arguing with Australian History* (Crows Nest: Unwin Hyman, 1984).

[3] Humphrey McQueen, *We Built This Country: Builders' Labourers and Their Unions, 1770 to the Future* (Port Adelaide: Ginninderra Press, 2011).

[4] Paul Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Work*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940).

[5] Ibid., 68. An expanded version of McQueen's abbreviated quotation is included by Frölich: "In other words, what presents itself to us as bourgeois legality is nothing but the violence of the ruling class, a violence raised to an obligatory norm from the outset."

[6] [Australian slang] A political party loyalist, particularly an uncritical one.

[7] *We Are Many*, dir. Amir Amirani (London: Amirani Media, 2014).

[8] See "Five Pillars," *Surplus Value*, <https://www.surplusvalue.org.au/FivePillars/index.html>.

[9] Premier of New South Wales (1925–27 and 1930–32); state leader of the ALP (1923–39).

[10] 14th Prime Minister of Australia (1941–45).

[11] [Hawaiian] People, persons, etc. It became a term for Pacific Islanders employed as laborers in Australia, although they are mostly from Melanesia rather than Polynesia.

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[19] Karl Kautsky, "Ultra-imperialism," *New Left Review* I, no. 59 (Jan/Feb 1970), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1914/09/ultra-imp.htm>.

[20] Leon Trotsky, "1789 – 1848 – 1905," in *Results and Prospects* (1906), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/rp03.htm>.

[21] Harry H., Ryan M., Duncan P., and Tom P., "Red Eureka: An interview with Tom Brennan, Arthur Dent, Tom Griffiths, and David McMullen," *Platypus Review* 169 (September 2024), <https://platypus1917.org/2024/09/01/red-eureka-an-interview-with-tom-brennan-arthur-dent-tom-griffiths-and-david-mcmullen/>.

[22] Barry York, "A Response to 'The legacy of 1968,'" *Platypus Review* 165 (April 2024), <https://platypus1917.org/2024/04/01/a-response-to-the-legacy-of-1968/>. See also Andy Blunden, Arthur Dent, and Alison Thorne, "The legacy of 1968," *Platypus Review* 165 (April 2024), <https://platypus1917.org/2024/04/01/the-legacy-of-1968/>.

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"Under a covert class dictatorship"

An interview with Humphrey McQueen

Jonny Black

On October 14, 2025, Platypus Affiliated Society member Jonny Black interviewed Humphrey McQueen, an Australian historian and writer whose work was shaped by his participation in the New Left. He has had a lasting influence on debates about nationalism, labor history, and the fate of radical politics in Australia. He is the author of A New Britannia: An Argument Concerning the Social Origins of Australian Radicalism and Nationalism *(1970),*[1] Gallipoli to Petrov: Arguing with Australian History *(1984),*[2] We Built This Country: Builders' Labourers and Their Unions, 1770 to the Future *(2011),*[3] *and more. An edited transcript follows.*

Jonny Black: When were you first aware of the Left as a young person?

Humphrey McQueen: The Left, as distinct from the labor movement, was always there. From my parents and my grandmother, that was just part of life. I was seven during the 1949 election campaign, and I remember we were sitting around on kitchen chairs in the lounge and, as you did in those days, we were listening to the radio.

As the results were coming in, I remember this vision of my grandmother getting up and saying to my father when the Australian Labor Party (ALP) lost, "Dinny, Dinny, what will become of us now?" My grandfather had died of black lung disease when he was 37, and she'd brought up the kids on her own, no widow's pension, scrubbing floors, all of those things; what she imagined was that if Labor lost the election, workers like her would go back to the sort of life they'd lived in the 20s and 30s. These were deep sensations we had.

My parents enrolled me in the Labor Party when I was 15 — you could do that in those days — because they needed a quorum for the local branch. I became the branch secretary when I was 16. But as for the notion of the Left, I knew there were communists because the bloke next door, a carpenter, was a communist, and he'd taken me along to hear the union secretary talk. And I knew about the Communist Party's Sunday morning meetings up at the Trades Hall.

When I left school, I found there was a discussion group that had been set up by some dissident communists. Helen Palmer, from the Palmer family, founded the magazine *Outlook*. They organized discussion groups around the place, and one of those was in Brisbane. I went along, and somebody lent me Paul Frölich's biography of Rosa Luxemburg.[4] I took it home and read it. And I have to say, one quotation in it actually changed my life. Luxemburg says, "The law is the class interest raised to an obligatory norm."[5] My whole attitude towards reform, government, and everything changed. I've kept on saying that to people ever since. I've been living under a class dictatorship all my life. It's just been a covert dictatorship.

I got to know some university people because our branch of the Labor Party and the university branch were in the same federal electorate. I got to meet people like Bruce McFarlen and Merle Thornton. Needless to say, I soaked up the ideas of the period. There was still a big Left in the Labor Party. That's the difference today. There was a Labor Party, and it had an active Left, very influenced by the Communist Party.

JB: You say there was a Labor Party.

HM: It's not a Labor Party today in the same way it was.

JB: Do you see the decline of organized labor under neoliberalism as opening new opportunities — opportunities that perhaps weren't taken up — to organize independently from the Labor Party and from the official trade-union movement?

HM: There were opportunities, and indeed one of the big ones in the early 80s was the anti-nuclear movement and the Nuclear Disarmament Party. People were concerned, and there was a lot of support for it, just as there is today with the movement around Gaza. A lot of people I know in the ALP, who I would have thought were rusted-on[6] ALP people, are very angry and active about that.

But the problem you face if you're a socialist, and you're concerned about destroying capitalism, is that you can't do it by a series of one-off issues. Whatever you thought about the Communist Party in its various forms, and whatever you thought about the Left of the Labor Party, there was a sense then in which this was designed to move towards really challenging the system as a system, and not just responding to the crises that get thrown up.

I don't know whether you've ever seen a wonderful documentary from England called *We Are Many* (2014).[7] It's about what happened in England after the failure, just as here and everywhere, of those huge demonstrations to stop the second invasion of Iraq, and it shows this mass movement that continued in England for the next 10 years. It explains why Jeremy Corbyn got elected as leader of the UK Labour Party by the rank and file. They were so active that when David Cameron wanted to intervene again with British troops in the Middle East, they convinced enough people that a number of Tory MPs wouldn't support it. Of course, they didn't think about it in terms of challenging the capitalist state for its continued existence, and yet it was still significant.

JB: You say these protest movements inevitably reach their limits. Do you see an alternative path to protest politics?

HM: We were thinking about this about 10 years ago, how you might seriously rebuild a working-class agenda independently of the ALP and of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). We came up with what we call the five pillars.[8] The principle we worked from was: what are the five reasons that get people out of bed in the morning? Do you have somewhere to live? Do you have a source of income? How are you going to get there? And then education and health. Those are the five principal issues that people battle with most days of their lives. Unless you can say something to people about each of those things in a way that's meaningful and practical, they're going to say, "I'm sure that's all very interesting, but what you're really telling me is you don't care about me. You have your own agenda, whether it's sexual equality, the Great Barrier Reef, or whatever. But if you show me that you're concerned about my needs, and the needs of other people like me, then I'll support you on those other things as well." This is why Ken Livingstone did so well as the Lord Mayor of London, because that's what he did. He showed people he was concerned about transport and housing, because they have control of housing, health, and education in a way that local governments here don't.

Too much of the academic Left thinks the world's a postgraduate seminar in critical studies. And if you say the wrong word, you're jumped on and thrown out and condemned to hell. But most people use language in a way that people who've done PhDs in critical theory don't; they're motivated rather by these everyday issues.

JB: I appreciate the point about getting back to bread-and-butter issues. But it raises a problem of the state, and what Marxists used to call Bonapartism. Figures like Jack Lang[9] and John Curtin[10] often appear as progressive Bonapartists in Leftist historiographies. They disciplined both workers and capitalists, all while speaking the language of socialism.

HM: Let's take the example of the socialization units and Jack Lang. That all came out of a militant 15-year period in New South Wales (NSW) politics. And partly it only came to Lang because he could get the support of some of those militant ex-union leaders who had broken with some of the others, those who then came around to his side within NSW faction politics. The one thing that's important to take from that, in terms of ALP politics in NSW, is what the Right learned in those years: if you lose the government and you wait around long enough, you'll get it back. But if you lose control of the party machine, you never get it back. The NSW Right would rather lose office than lose control of the party machine.

Let's also remember that Lang was dealing with people whose life experience was like that of my grandparents: dead at 37, scrubbing floors to keep three kids. That was everyday life. It wasn't as difficult as it apparently is today to make a connection with those people, if you promised them something. And Lang did introduce child endowment. It wasn't just that he talked about it, they actually did do things. So much has been lost and destroyed in the last 40 years. You can't just say, "we'll pluck that out of the air; we'll write another program!" That has to come bit by bit, by people being actively engaged in it.

I keep stressing this, but when I encountered the communist union officials and the labor movement in the late 50s, a huge number of working people like my father just knew that there was no such thing as a fair day's pay. Most of them couldn't have given you what you might call a Marxist analysis of why that was the case. Now, so much has been lost that people think exploitation is like wage theft, as if it's something on the margins, and not a necessary part of the capitalist system. People talk about modern slavery, but how many of us talk about wage slavery anymore?

JB: In your most famous work *A New Britannia*, you talk about how an underclass of indentured servants, including the *Kanakas*,[11] operated as a halfway house between slavery and wage labor during the Second Industrial Revolution. In the case of post-convict 19th-century Australia, it does remind me of that quote from Marx in the introduction to his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843–44), where he says Germany finds itself in the society of freedom on the day of its internment.[12]

This is the context for your discussion of the White Australia Policy, which is often reduced to merely an economic issue that is then demagogued to mislead the workers. One of the things I appreciated about *A New Britannia* is that it offers a wider range of ideological critique. An example that springs to mind is how you explored the sexual dimension of racial paranoia.

HM: All ideas are complexes of both material experience and ideological, intellectual influences. There's a great quote I often use from Theodor Adorno: "The masses aren't so stupid that they'd react to the brazen wink of propaganda if it didn't strike a chord in their own experience."[13] So if you're trying to analyze something like White Australia, you've got to take both sides of that.

Then look at how layers are perhaps laid on top of that by anti-working-class propagandists. This relates to what Marx actually says about religion. Most people would recognize the quote about religion as the opium of the people. In context, Marx isn't saying that religion puts you to sleep; that's not what opium does. Marx likely knew, because he was taking opiates all the time for the various pains he had, that they deaden the pain so you can go on. Religion is the cry of the oppressed, the hope in a hopeless world. You can't get rid of religion until you get rid of the conditions that make some kind of opiate absolutely essential for getting through the day.

There are some needs that aren't going to be solved by socialism or communism. There are simple facts in life: sometimes people we love don't love us back, or a loved one dies. You don't need religion to deal with that, but you need some sort of opiate, and people find it in music, art, friendships, etc. The rise of fundamentalism is everywhere today, whether it's Hindus or the Protestants in the U.S. or here, and this is a sign of social disintegration, which shows how lonely people are. They're seeking some kind of social connectedness. The nature of work today is so fractured and, while not everyone is doing gig work, even salaried professionals such as university lecturers just lock themselves in their offices and turn their computers on. When I was teaching at a university 50 years ago, one of the things about it was you went to morning tea, all the arts faculty gathered there, and you'd sit around tables with people from different departments and share a social exchange of ideas; you got to know people. In the 1950s and the 60s, the companies would put on social groups for their employees. For example work would sometimes even shut down early so everyone could see the sporting teams play. They'd bind people to each other, and to the company of course.

JB: I'm sure you're aware of the work Elizabeth Humphrys and Tad Tietze have elaborated on in terms of the hollowing out of civil society.[14] Peter Mair's *Ruling the Void* (2013)[15] and Robert D. Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000)[16] address a similar problem. You are writing a book on artificial intelligence; how does that fit with your perspective on social fracturing?

HM: The book is called *Can Robots Dream of Becoming Time Poor? Automation, AI, and the Future of Labor Times*. The thread that runs through it is the control of labor time, which is the core point of a Marxian analysis of the capitalist system. During the work-choices campaign the trade unions were going on again about a fair day's pay. And we kept saying, "yes, but what the boss wants is to control the application of your labor power." That is control over how labor time works. If you don't bring that in, you don't get the sense of surplus value and everything that flows from that. A lot of the discussion about artificial intelligence never starts out from where it must, which is what I address in my book: what is human intelligence? As Marx makes clear, it comes through our socialization.

The reason that you and I are able to have this conversation is because when we were growing up, we were surrounded by people who were talking to each other. And they talked to us, and they looked in our eyes when we were babies, and we learned to speak. Then we were sent off to schools where we learned to read and write, etc., but that fundamental socializing starts with the family. And we know from terrible situations where children are deprived of that socialization, if they don't get it before they're about five or seven, they never fully develop into adults; the neural pathways of the brain don't develop. In extreme cases of neglect, children never learn how to speak. We have to start with these questions about the material basis of human intelligence. What is intelligence in *other* animals?

I've always objected to the liberationist view that we've got to save animals. No, we've got to save other animals. We're a particular kind of animal. To understand human intelligence properly, we have to learn how intelligence operates in other animals and how it is and isn't the same within us. Then we can think about what goes on in a machine. I don't want to say that in a hundred years' time, it won't be possible to build a machine that can feel love, passions, and hate. I hope it doesn't happen, but it's not impossible. I don't want to be like the archbishop in Brecht's poem about the tailor of Ulm who puts on waxed wings, jumps off the cathedral spire, and crashes to his death, and the archbishop says it's a "wicked, foolish lie, for man will never fly."[17]

In the meantime, we have to look at what we're using it for. It's not the fascination that people have about fake faces, fake voices, etc. They're already using AI to control labor times. Artificial intelligence is increasing the rate of exploitation.

Recall from Marx's *Capital* (1867) about the difference between the architect and the bee.[18] Bees do all sorts of amazing things that architects can't do all the time. But the difference, he says, is that the human architect builds in his mind the building that he will then realize in his activity. He then goes on to correct himself because, as we all know, whatever our project is on day one, it's not the one we end up with. We learn how to get to where we want to go by engaging with it. We become what we do, and if we don't do anything, we don't become anything. The other problem we face is that we're always running behind changes in the real world.

JB: The Second Industrial Revolution had these ideas, which is reminiscent of how we're thinking about AI. The Gilded Age promised to socialize the world on a scale hitherto never experienced, speed up the labor process, and draw more workers into wage labor than ever before, and yet that process came with a hell of a lot of destruction, such as imperialism leading into World War I. Was proletarian socialism anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, and how was this distinct from liberal critiques at the time?

HM: I'm glad you raised the question of the stages of capitalism compared to how people try to talk about imperialism now, or the fashionable talk about colonization, as if it's all the same thing; as if colonization in the 18th century and colonization today are the same thing. There's a huge difference between the impact that the East India Company had on the indigenous population of Australia and the way in which the Adani Coal Mine is going to have an effect on both the indigenous and settler population. These are completely different stages of the capitalist system.

The chapter I'm grappling with in my book at the moment is about what stage of capitalism we are in now. I reread Kautsky's notorious essay "Ultra-imperialism" (1914), which I had read when *New Left Review* republished it in 1970,[19] again a few years ago, and last week I read it again.

Like many at the time, I swallowed the popular line, but Kautsky's not really saying what Lenin accuses him of saying. It's a different analysis and we need to remember that it's virtually written before the war breaks out. Kautsky's not in the middle of the war as Lenin was. Did anybody think the war would go on for four and a half years in August 1914? I don't think so. The only person I know who predicted that was Friedrich Engels in the 1890s, 20 years before.

The picture of ultra-imperialism that Kautsky gives is what the U.S. corporate welfare state is able to achieve after 1945. Fundamentally they control the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the IMF, the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. Ultra-imperialism is fulfilled by the dominance of the U.S. monopolizing capital.

JB: So where are we now?

HM: That's cracking apart and it has been for some time, but again you've got to also bring in the material changes. With high-speed computers and AI, the Left gets caught up in a kind of technological determinism: they're only looking at machines as the drivers of change. Some of the biggest changes in the 19th century were the developments in the chemical industry; it's not just technology but also scientific technique. Now, in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the different fields of knowledge play different parts. Towards the end of my new book, there are two chapters that deal with this.

One chapter is called "Who Has a Future?" There are three versions of the future that I lay out. One is that we're able to take control of the system. The other one is that the capitalists decide that we're not going to work in the same way anymore, but they're going to attempt to keep capital accumulation going, with a guaranteed basic income tacked on. This isn't going to happen. And the last alternative? Extermination. That's the hard reality. It might not happen next week but this is the hundred-year view. They don't want to keep us now, they just need us.

My final chapter is called "To Be a Luddite." There I defend who the Luddites were and what they did, because they were not anti-machines; they were anti-boss, and they grew out of a thousand-year struggle. It didn't just happen for 10 years, 1810–20, like the school textbooks tell you; it's a struggle that's gone back a thousand years. I've tracked that all the way through. One of the great drivers of it in the early 19th century was the struggle against the enclosure of agricultural lands.

JB: Thinking on the historical specificity of the task of the proletariat, I wonder what elements remain of a class consciousness that Lenin or Kautsky could have taken for granted. When Trotsky says the 19th century hasn't passed in vain,[20] it is due to a massive political growth embodied in the Second International. Did the 20th century pass in vain? What role does consciousness play, even the absence of consciousness?

HM: True consciousness has two major parts. One of them is if you can see that the boss is your enemy. So you say, "we've got to destroy the boss." The other thing you can say is, "we recognize the boss is the enemy and we've got to organize our tactics to make the most of what we can get out of the boss class." The labor movement everywhere has been divided between those two times and moments. You can't overthrow the capitalist system every day of the week, so there's a balance between the two. But in both cases you have the class consciousness that the boss is not your friend, and you have the understanding that the state is the organized enemy of the working class. Everything is the result of the relative strength of the contending classes within the state apparatus. From here the class struggle can be played out in schools, hospitals, parliament, or anywhere. Then there's a completely false consciousness that says, if you're nice to the boss, he'll be nice to you.

JB: I suppose we all go along to get along at work. Workers see themselves as having a common destiny, including with the managers and administrators of capitalism, and surely this isn't entirely false consciousness.

HM: It's intriguing sometimes how the boss class expresses a Marxist analysis. It doesn't mean to, but recently they've been saying, "since the budget has given this support for energy bills and other things, the basic wage need not go up." So what the boss is saying, without knowing it, is that the wage is the socially necessary cost of reproducing our labor power, whether that comes from child endowment or from public housing, as Engels marvelously spelled out. That's what they have to give us to reproduce capital.

JB: I want to talk to you about your intellectual development around Maoism and the New Left. We spent a bit of time interviewing some of that milieu associated with Red Eureka, including Albert Langer and Barry York, and there seems to be a split within Maoism around the question of imperialism.[21] Barry York said, for example, that he has always been anti-fascist first and anti-imperialist second.[22]

HM: I don't know because I haven't paid much attention for the last few decades, but I was a Maoist before there were Maoists. I did my honors thesis on the Communist Party of China and its significance for the world communist movement. We were being told that the Chinese wanted to get into a war, and I thought, that can't be right. So I went and read 8 years of *Peking Review*[23] and many other things. I submitted the thesis at the end of 1964, before the Cultural Revolution broke out. I found that most of the things that we were being told about China simply weren't true. People now talk about Maoism and Stalinism without ever thinking of how racist their framing can be. What they're doing is they're viewing the world through the anus of the Bolshevik Revolution, as if China didn't have several thousand years of history. It may be that Maoism was worse than Stalinism, but Maoism wasn't Stalinism; it was Chinese.

When Mao said you'd need 20 cultural revolutions to erase the impact of Confucianism in China, that's a problem specific to Chinese conditions. You can't understand the appeal of Maoism without understanding how people were responding to the Vietnam War. Neither the Maoists nor the Trotskyists like to hear this, but Maoism was the Trotskyism of the 60s and 70s. It was the way in which we thought we were going to break through the bureaucratization of socialism. That's what the Cultural Revolution looked like to us. I never went to China or one of the study tours; I wasn't particularly interested in doing that. For me, the question was how you dealt with capitalism in Australia.

For all the carrying on about fascism that the bloody Left does, they don't know what it is. We've lived under a covert class dictatorship all our lives. Fascism is an overt class dictatorship. But there are overt class dictatorships that are not fascism.

"'Under a covert class dictatorship'" continues on page 4